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A Historic Excuse for a Club

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 8 — For more than a century the Alibi Club has offered some of this city's most prominent men just what its name implies, an excuse to escape into a fraternal world of their own.

The club is little known outside its own membership. Its headquarters has no imposing facade like those of the Metropolitan and Cosmos clubs. Instead, it occupies a small pre-Civil War house that is dwarfed by a seven-story hotel on one side and a nondescript building housing medical offices on the other.

Yet it could be called the club of clubs, the city's most elite, for its membership is limited at all times to 50 men, each one voted in unanimously, most from the top ranks of Government and the military and from the city's oldest families.

Name Dropping

Vice President Bush is a member. So are Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. and a retired Justice, Potter Stewart; Jerauld Wright, the retired admiral who was once commander of the Atlantic Fleet, and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, also retired, who was once chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

George C. Marshall, now deceased, liked to spend quiet moments in the midst of the club's incredible clutter when he was Secretary of State in the 1940's. Llewelyn Thompson, Ambassador to the Soviet Union, was a member, along with John Foster Dulles, another former Secretary of State; Allen W. Dulles, the former Director of Central Intelligence, and Alfred Gruenther, once supreme military commander of NATO.

"We really don't pretend to be anything special," said W. John Kenney, the current proctor (the club's name for president), a longtime member who once served as under secretary of the Navy in the Truman Administration. "We're just a group of people who like each other."

A Secluded Spot

It all began in 1884 when seven members of the Metropolitan Club decided they wanted a more secluded spot in which to play poker, tell jokes and try their hand at a little cuisine of their own making.

They acquired a two-room house, former slave quarters, on I Street between 18th and 19th Streets. Over the years it has been enlarged to include a modern kitchen, a dining room, game rooms and various other quarters. But even with the additions, the narrow red brick building, with its green shutters and brown window trim, looks like a 19th-century relic along a busy modern street.

At first it was known as "That Little Club." Members still fondly refer to it as "The Joint." But it finally ac-

quired a permanent name when one member showed up at the door one night and said he was in dire need of an alibi, obviously one that his wife might believe. The name stuck.

No Women as Members

The club has never permitted women as members: according to old-timers in the ranks, the idea has never even come up and women have never applied for membership. But members may invite their wives and other women to private functions, although not to the regular Friday luncheons.

It was at the Alibi Club that Nicholas Longworth, later Speaker of the House, entertained his future wife, Alice Roosevelt, and several of her friends at a private dinner he had prepared.

The fact that women only occasionally are seen entering the club proved to be somewhat embarrassing one time some years ago. A new police officer stationed along the street saw a parade of well-dressed men enter-

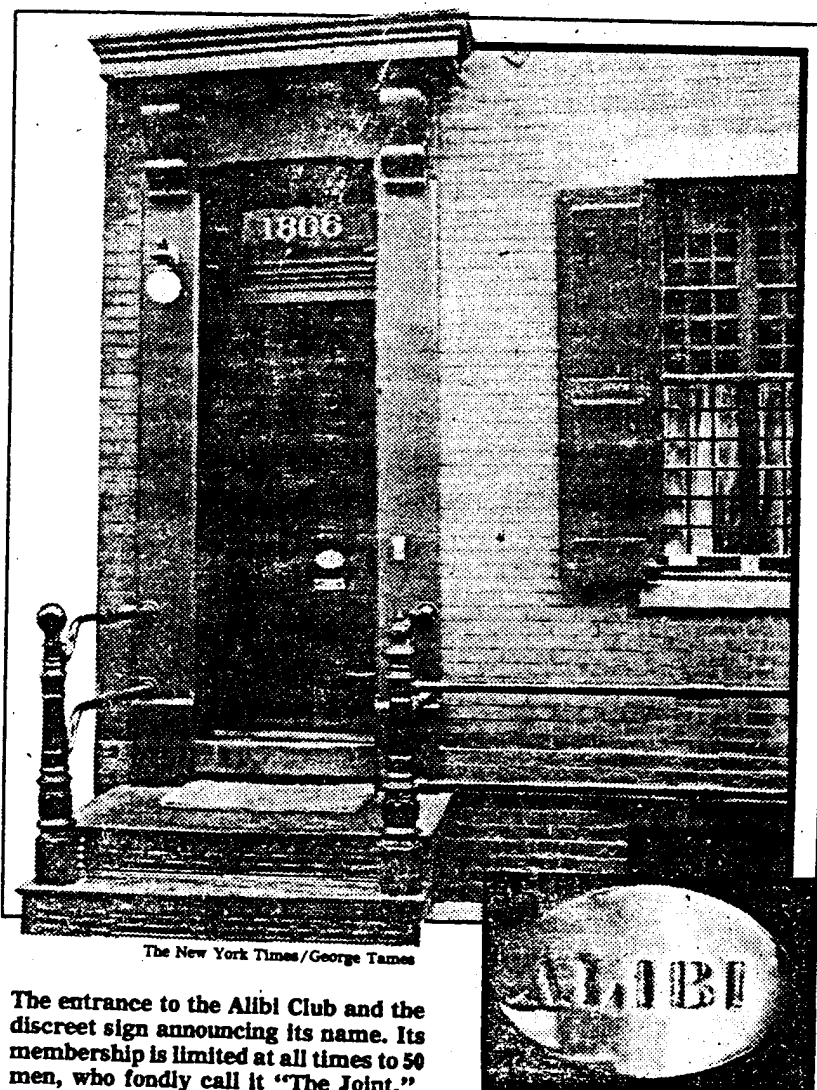
ing the small house and became suspicious enough to report it to headquarters.

"So we got raided," Mr. Kenney said with good humor. "They thought we had girls in there. We didn't, of course, and we got it all straightened out."

While most of the city's exclusive clubs are elegantly furnished, the Alibi Club is cluttered with a century of memorabilia, a veritable flea market of objects brought back from all over the world by well-traveled members.

There are displays of boomerangs, a British rum cask mounted on an elephant's foot, a statue of a monkey devil making a pass at a mermaid, an old-fashioned cigar lighter, a somewhat battered piano, wall lockers in which members kept liquor in Prohibition. Virtually every inch of wall space displays cartoons and portraits of past and present members.

"These are the things," Mr. Kenney said, "that our wives won't let us keep at home."



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The entrance to the Alibi Club and the discreet sign announcing its name. Its membership is limited at all times to 50 men, who fondly call it "The Joint."